

**Sydney Sarel, the Olympic race-walking missionary of London's East End
By Bob Phillips**

Sydney Sarel's Olympic accomplishments were not of the highest order of distinction, it has to be said. For the 3500 metres track walk at the 1908 London Games he was one of the 12 Britons selected, as allowed under the existing rules, and he was eliminated in his heat, finishing in 5th place more than half-a-minute away from qualifying for the final. In his defence it should be pointed out that it remains a mystery as to why he was nominated for this event at all and not for the 10 miles walk, for which he would have been much better suited. Three months previously he had placed a commendable 6th in the AAA seven miles walk and had been 4th in the same event in both 1906 and 1907, and so had more obvious credentials for the longer distance than half of those chosen.

Yet there was very much more to his life than some respectable race-walking achievements and a single obscure Olympic appearance. In his obituary in "The Times" he was described as "a great East End character ... even when into his 70s he could still be seen trotting round Victoria Park with shorts to his knees and wearing his Olympic cap". In an interview late in his life with a London local newspaper, the "Hackney Gazette", he said, "I was myself a very fortunate third-class man who has been able to be of use by being on the spot sometimes when wanted".

This self-appraisal was too modest by far. He died on 23 December 1950 at the age of 78, having given more than a half-century of dedicated service to the impoverished people of the East End of London in his capacity as an Anglican priest. In the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, some of the worst slums in London were to be found in Bethnal Green, and Jack the Ripper carried out his crimes in the western end of the borough and in neighbouring Whitechapel.

Sydney Lancaster Sarel was born in favourable circumstances in Kensington on 18 June 1872. He was the youngest son of Thomas Sarel, who was employed by a leading firm of bankers, Cox & King's, and the youngster clearly had a privileged upbringing even though he was only five years old when his father died. For his education Sydney Sarel was sent to Tonbridge, which was longer-established than five of the nine schools designated by the Public Schools' Act of 1868 and was to be listed among the 25 in the Public Schools' Yearbook of 1889.

The name "Sarel" originates from Normandy, having been brought to England by followers of William the Conqueror in the 11th Century, and among half-a-dozen or so variations the most common is "Searle". There is another sporting connection, as there was a Major William Sarel, who was secretary of Sussex Country Cricket Club from 1919 to 1922 and remarkably made a century on his first-class debut against Oxford University in 1919 at the age of 44. He was the son of a General and his four brothers included a Colonel and a Rear-Admiral, but there is no obvious relationship with Sydney Sarel's family.

After leaving school Sydney Sarel went to Oxford University to study for a degree in natural science at Keble College. Tonbridge had already produced an athlete of real note in John Le Fleming, who won the Inter-Varsity 120 yards hurdles for Cambridge against Oxford in 1887 and 1888 and in the first of those years was also AAA champion in the highly commendable time for that era of 16 1/5. His younger brother, Henry, again educated at Tonbridge, was to win the same event for Cambridge in 1891 and 1892. Another former Tonbridge pupil with the splendidly Dickensian name of Horatio Booty had won the Inter-Varsity 100 yards in 1885.

All of the published references to Sydney Sarel's sporting interests claim incorrectly that he narrowly failed to qualify to represent Oxford against Cambridge at 880 yards. Even the most authoritative of the UK's National Union of Track Statisticians sources states this as fact, but this could not possibly have been true for the simple reason that there was no 880 yards in the Inter-Varsity match until 1899, and Sarel had graduated with an MA degree five years before. There is no doubt that Sarel was an enthusiastic track-runner during the 1890s, but he seems to have done most of his racing for London Athletic Club after his graduation, winning their mile handicap event in 1894 and 1895. As his ability improved so the advantage which he was given at the start was reduced – from 130 yards in 1894 to 105 yards in 1895 and 65 yards in 1896.

In the 1894 race Sarel had just managed to hold off William Lutyens, one of the very finest milers of the era who won that event for Cambridge at the Inter-Varsity match for four successive years, 1892 to 1895. Sarel was timed in 4:22 3/5 and so ran the equivalent of between 4:40 and 4:42 for the full distance. The Inter-Varsity winners in the two years preceding Lutyens had both been from Oxford, and as William Pollock-Hill – who was also an undergraduate at Keble College – ran 4:21 3/5 in 1890 and B.C. Allen 4:26 3/5 in 1891 it would not seem likely that Sarel was ever a serious contender for an Oxford place at this distance. Pollock-Hill also won the Inter-Varsity cross-country race in 1888 and 1889 and three others from Keble took part in that event during the years 1890 to 1892 – but not Sarel.

Pollock-Hill would have provided an inspiring role model for the likes of Sarel as he set the Inter-Varsity mile record at 4:19 4/5 in 1894 at a time when the best time ever by an amateur was only two seconds faster, and Harold Abrahams was later to write of him, "I have no doubt he is to be numbered among the all-time greats". Pollock-Hill, also to become a vicar, was a most distinctive runner to watch as he was completely bald by the age of 20.

The best of Sarel's LAC one-mile handicap performances seems to have been on 22 June 1895 at Stamford Bridge when he was timed in 4:23 3/5, winning by half-a-yard from W.W. Crowhurst, who was off 150 yards, with C.S. Sydenham, off 30 yards, only another half-a-yard behind in 3rd place. Sarel's time was worth about 4:38 for a full mile.

The Olympic Games of 1896 passes largely unnoticed

The 1896 LAC meeting took place on the day after the athletics events at the inaugural Modern Olympic Games in Athens had been completed, and other winners included Charles Bradley, who beat Alf Downer at 75 yards, and Fred Bacon, who won at four miles. All three were among the leading athletes of the age and may well have been Olympic champions had they gone to Athens. Very few people in Britain were even aware that the Olympics were taking place, though it is intriguing to speculate that Sydney Sarel might just conceivably have been one of those in the know. An Oxford University contemporary of his, George Stuart Robertson, whose favoured event was the hammer throw, which he won at the Inter-Varsity matches of 1893-94-95, did go to the Games, having been alerted by chance when he spotted an advertisement in the window of the Thomas Cook's travel agency in London.

Sarel's theological ideas had been strongly influenced by Arthur Winnington-Ingram, who was the principal of the Oxford House Settlement in Bethnal Green (and would be Bishop of London from 1901 to 1939). Undergraduates at the university were encouraged to stay at the Settlement and give their time to help in the work of supporting the poor and dispossessed in that disadvantaged district of London. After graduation Sarel had taught science at Borlase School (now St William Borlase's Grammar School) in Marlow, in Buckinghamshire, for a year or so, but he then went to stay at the Settlement during 1896-97 and spent a year at Cuddesdon Theological College, near Oxford, before being ordained as a priest in December 1898.

Throughout this decisive period of his life he continued to compete at various track distances, including 880 yards, $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles and three miles, and was to do so until at least 1904. He was also a member of both the Lea Harriers and Thames Hare & Hounds clubs and ran cross-country for them, winning the latter's "Fowler-Dixon Challenge Bowl" in 1906 over a distance of $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles at Roehampton in a time of 40:39. The Inter-Varsity race was also run over a course of the same length at Roehampton from 1896 to 1925, but as the fastest time recorded in those years (in 1922) was 50 seconds slower than Sarel's it seems unlikely that the undergraduates covered an identical route.

Sarel's first attempt at race-walking would appear to be in the London AC seven miles challenge cup event at Stamford Bridge on 16 September 1903, but it certainly gave no suggestion of natural talent. The winner was R.H. Watson in 56:13 $\frac{2}{5}$ from Frederick Thompson, who would have a fine record in the AAA seven miles event, placing 2nd in 1905 and 1906 and winning in 1907. Sarel was a very distant 3rd in 1:03:25 $\frac{2}{5}$, and yet within three years he had progressed out of all recognition and was not far off the very front rank of race-walking in Britain.

The 1906 AAA seven miles walk, held at Stamford Bridge on 7 April, was won by Frank Carter, of Queen's Park Harriers, in 53:20 $\frac{1}{5}$, and "The Times" said of him that he "walked from start to finish in really beautiful form", with the reporter further noting, "The next best style was shown by the Reverend S.L. Sarel. He finished 4th in much faster time than he has ever before accomplished". Rev. Sarel clocked 54:35, and a further point was made in the article that he was believed to be the first competitor in the AAA walks from Oxford or Cambridge Universities since John Chambers, who had been the inaugural national race-walking champion, winning the seven miles event held under the auspices of the Amateur Athletic Club in 1866. Chambers was aptly described by Peter Lovesey in his centenary history of the AAA as "one of those rugged Victorians who excelled in any sport he tried" and was also commended for his administrative skills as "the architect of modern athletics".

The Reverend's fastest walk yet as he is again 4th in the AAA race.

Rev. Sarel had by now been curate at St Saviour's, Hoxton, in the East End of London, for eight years, and he continued to mature as a race-walker – maybe divine guidance? He was 4th again in the 1907 AAA seven miles, held at Fallowfield, Manchester, on 13 April, but in a much faster time of 53:01, only a quarter-of-a-minute behind the winner, Frederick Thompson. A week later the margin between the two was much the same in a three-mile event organised by London AC at Stamford Bridge: Thompson 1st in 21:51, Sarel 2nd in 22:01.

In March of 1908 Rev. Sarel was appointed vicar of St Thomas's, Bethnal Green, and maybe his new duties restricted his training, which he often did at 11 o'clock at night, stop-watch in hand, because he was more than two minutes slower than the previous year in the AAA seven miles walk the following month, though still finishing 6th as Ernie Webb, of Herne Hill Harriers, won from Frank Carter. The first five only were selected for the 10 miles walk at the Olympics, but as the others among the dozen nominated included George Lerner, the Brighton policeman who was to win both Olympic walks, and Edward Spencer, of Polytechnic Harriers, whose speciality was the London-to-Brighton event and who took the bronze medal at the longer Olympic walk, the selectors no doubt felt fully justified in their decision.

Though that was the end of his major competitive career, Rev. Sarel went on racing for many more years to come, and when he placed 3rd, for instance, at the 1923 London AC three miles walk at the age of 50 he was commended by "The Times", together with J.H. Kempton in 2nd place, as "two veterans, both of whom did well in the circumstances". Having been appointed rector of St Matthew's, Bethnal Green, and Rural Dean in 1916, Rev. Sarel took over another parish in 1923 and four years later became a Prebendary (senior member of the clergy) responsible for the Mapesbury area of North-West London, covering part of Kilburn and Cricklewood. He was a member of the London Diocesan Conference and served on the council of Oxford House. Then, as if these ecclesiastical duties were not enough to occupy his time, he was elected as a local councillor for Bethnal Green South and in 1928 received the fourth highest vote of the nine successful Progressive Party candidates to the exclusion of the nine representatives each of the Labour and Communist Parties.

Retaining his involvement with athletics, he was president of London AC in 1928, chairman at the celebratory dinner after the Inter-Varsity cross-country race of 1930, and assisted at the funeral services for Sir Harry Barclay, the AAA honorary secretary, in 1933 and for an Olympic race-walking team-mate, Edgar Hammond, who still held the 24-hour record from 37 years before, in 1946. Rev. Sarel was also an active vice-president of Victoria Park Harriers, which had been founded in 1926.

He retained traditional views and was one of 23 Rural Deans who put their names to a letter to "The Times" in 1932 protesting at the decision to allow cinemas to open at 3.30 p.m. on a Sunday instead of 6 p.m. "We regard it as a menace to the Christian character of our people and a blow to all that we hold most dear in English life", the clerics thundered. The Reverend Sarel married in 1938 at the advanced age of 66. A photograph of him is to be found in the National Portrait Gallery in London. In the last year of his life, 1950, his best time for the seven miles walk achieved 43 years previously would still have been good enough for 3rd place in the AAA event.

Sydney Sarel died at Bethnal Green, in London, on 23 December 1950, aged 78, and was praised as a legendary figure for his work in helping the poor.